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ABSTRACT

Although minimum competency testing is increasingly popular, there is presently a paucity of information on teachers' and principals' use of and attitudes toward these testing programs. Therefore, a study examined the use and perceived impact of standardized reading tests in Puerto Rico and compared these results to the results of a similar study conducted in California. After being translated into Spanish and slightly modified from a version originally used in California, 75 copies of a 43-item questionnaire were sent to 25 Puerto Rican schools to be filled out by principals and by second and fifth grade teachers. Results pointed toward four general conclusions: (1) tests are valued and extensively used by both principals and teachers in Puerto Rico; (2) province- and district-wide reading assessments in Puerto Rico primarily affect curriculum decisions, particularly on the local school level; (3) Puerto Rican teachers and principals felt that five generally accepted goals of testing programs were being met; and (4) although differences exist in the areas of test preferences and the amount of testing that is acceptable, teachers and principals in California and Puerto Rico are generally similar in their attitudes toward standardized tests. (JL)

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A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF EDUCATORS' PERCEPTIONS AND USE OF MANDATED READING ASSESSMENTS

Introduction

With the increasing emphasis on minimum competency testing has come a correponding increase in mandated, district-wide testing programs. Results of such testing are often highly publicized, though perhaps not always completely understood. Yet, even though mandated tests have become an integral part of schooling in many areas of this country, we know little about specific testing practices. Even less data are available regarding the attitudes, values and perceived impact of testing programs in reading from the standpoint of educators whom such tests effect most directly: teachers and principals. Our lack of knowledge in this important area has been previously noted by Singer, Ruddell, McNeil, & Whittrock (1980), and Ruddell (1981). The need for such data, if school district personnel and test publishers are to make reasoned, cost effective decisions, is clear.

There is also a paucity of comparative data, both on a national and international level, regarding test use and impact. This study used an instrument developed by Ruddell & Kinzer (1981), which previously served as a tool to gather such data in California. The study reported here was performed in Puerto Rico. This site was chosen because Puerto Rico is a United States' protectorate, yet has an independent educational system and is often considered a Latin American country. The results provide insights into testing practices and opinions in diverse regions, and allow a direct comparison to the results of Ruddell & Kinzer's (1982) research, as well as to findings reported by Kinzer & Ruddell (1981). The following research questions guided this study:

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1. How do teachers' and principals' perceptions regarding tests and testing in reading compare across Puerto Rico and California?

2. How are tests used and perceived by teachers and principals in Puerto Rico?

3. What do teachers and principals feel are the major areas of impact of standardized testing programs, related to reading, in Puerto Rico?

4. How well do teachers and principals feel the goals of standardized testing programs, related to reading, are being met in Puerto Rico?

Method

The Ruddell & Kinzer questionnaire was translated and slightly modified for the Spanish speaking population. Seventy-five 43-item questionnaires were sent to 25 Puerto Rican schools. In each school, principals as well as second and fifth grade teachers were asked to respond. The sample reflected a balance across rural and urban schools and school districts across the country. An initial and follow-up mailing yielded a 48% return, including 14 responses from principals, and 11 each from second and fifth grade teachers. In 11 instances, all three respondents within the school returned the questionnaire. In three cases, only the principal responded. The sample size and sampling procedure was chosen to reflect that used by the Ruddell & Kinzer and Kinzer & Ruddell studies.

Results and Discussion

Table 1 summarizes the results of the Puerto Rican data and provides a comparison with the Ruddell & Kinzer and Kinzer & Ruddell findings in

California. As in the Californian studies, the Puerto Rican data are reported as percentages of valid responses, excluding missing data.

Insert Table 1 Here

Attitudes and Perceptions

Respondents across both regions felt that standardized testing programs in reading are useful and important. Teachers and principals in California, however, were markedly less supportive of such tests being administered more than once a year. In the Californian sample, 11.11% of the teachers and 13.33% of the principals felt that such tests should never be given. None of the Puerto Rican respondents felt similarly, with 14.55% of the teachers stating that standardized reading tests should be administered more than twice a year. Yet, more respondents in California felt that their testing program matched their reading curriculum than did their Puerto Rican counterparts.

When asked to rank the impact of their testing programs, respondents in both regions noted the greatest impact in local school curriculum planning. Puerto Rican teachers, however, ranked planning for class instruction as the next greatest area of impact, while the other respondents ranked district curriculum planning as second. The impact of standardized testing programs in reading on budgetary planning was ranked last overall.

Perceptions regarding how well goals of the respective district-wide testing programs were being met differed somewhat across Puerto Rico and California. With the exception of the goal "to provide the public with

Table 1

Comparative and Descriptive Data (Percent of Valid Responses)

	PUERTO RICAN DATA		RUDDELL & KINZER KINZER & RUDDELL (CALIFORNIAN DATA)	
	Principal N=14	Teacher N=22	Principal N=12	Teacher N=18
Test Utilization/Importance				
useful to very useful	92.80	83.85	86.67	76.47
important to very important	85.70	76.85	100.00	84.00
Test Administration (Perceived optimum number)				
once a year	64.30	32.25	73.33	50.00
twice a year	28.60	53.00	6.67	38.89
more than twice a year	7.10	14.55	6.67	0
never	0	0	13.33	11.11
Curriculum Factors				
test strongly related to curric.	71.40	71.25	100.00	88.20
Impact of Testing (perceived major impact)				
district curric. planning	63.63	26.67	66.67	47.05
local school planning	80.00	72.22	80.00	47.05
planning inservice needs	37.50	42.85	21.42	23.52
planning class instruction	50.00	53.33	14.28	41.17
budgetary planning	16.70	28.57	9.09	29.41
Goals of Testing (perceived as met mostly or completely)				
aid in program improvement	92.30	66.67	84.61	44.44
provide public w/ knowledge	46.16	36.84	46.67	31.58
evaluate special programs	84.61	65.00	26.67	27.78
budget allocation decisions	58.33	27.78	13.33	5.88
Test Preferences (major preference for province/state-wide testing)				
standardized	53.84	29.30	78.57	64.70
criterion referenced	33.33	21.42	16.67	45.45
teacher-made	16.66	70.10	9.09	12.50
Test Preferences (major preference for schoolwide testing)				
standardized	25.00	7.14	60.00	17.64
criterion referenced	61.50	40.95	42.85	58.82
teacher-made	23.10	63.90	0	45.45
Test Preferences (major preference for classroom testing)				
standardized	9.09	7.14	28.57	0
criterion referenced	63.63	39.30	53.84	47.05
teacher-made	41.66	66.70	23.07	62.50

knowledge," which approximately equal numbers of respondents agreed was being mostly to completely met, more Puerto Rican than Californian respondents felt that their testing program goals were being met. In both regions studied, the greatest number of respondents felt that the goal "to aid in program improvement" was being met, while the goal "to aid in budget decisions" ranked last. Overall, more principals than teachers felt that the testing program goals were being fulfilled.

Test Preferences

Respondents were asked to rank standardized, criterion referenced and teacher-made tests in terms of preference for assessing student reading in province/state-wide, school-wide, or classroom situations. Results indicate that the Californian teachers and principals are more comfortable with standardized tests than are the Puerto Rican respondents. Although principals in both regions ranked standardized tests as their first choice for testing on a province/state-wide basis, 78.57% of Californian principals (and 64.70% of the teachers) noted this preference, as compared to only 53.84% and 12.50%, school-wide and classroom testing situations.

Puerto Rican teachers seem to place more faith in their own, teacher-made tests than in other types of measures, ranking teacher-made tests as their first choice across all three testing situations. Criterion referenced tests were the second choice of Puerto Rican teachers, for both school-wide and classroom assessment. Teachers in California agreed with the primary ranking of teacher-made tests for classroom testing, but preferred criterion referenced tests for school-wide testing, and standardized tests for testing on a province/state-wide basis.

Conclusions

The results of this study point toward four general conclusions. These relate specifically to the research questions noted previously. First, tests are valued and extensively used by both principals and teachers in Puerto Rico. This is true even though over 60% of both teachers and principals noted that over 3 hours were required to prepare for test administration (e.g., group meetings to examine manuals, discuss procedure, etc.). This did not include actual administration time, which was time that would have otherwise been used for instructional purposes. Yet, even though a significant amount of instructional time is required to administer the standardized testing program, respondents felt that such testing was useful and important.

Secondly, province and district-wide reading assessments in Puerto Rico impact primarily on curriculum decisions, with the greatest impact at the local school level. This might well be the reason for the testing program being perceived as valuable and important, even given the amounts of time and energy required for its implementation. Assessment results also have a significant impact on curriculum planning at the classroom and district level, although to a somewhat lesser degree. The impact of district-wide reading/testing progams in Puerto Rico is least felt in the areas of inservice and budgetary planning.

Thirdly, Puerto Rican teachers and principals feel that five generally accepted goals of testing programs are being met. Although teachers felt less confident than principals that the goals of their district's testing program were being fulfilled, there was no general teacher dissatisfaction with the overall testing program in reading.

Finally, a comparison of the Puerto Rican data with similar studies in California reveals that the two groups are similar rather than dichotomous. Although specific, interesting differences exist, most notably in the areas of test preferences and amount of testing which is acceptable, general patterns are similar. Educators in both regions voice a clear concern that testing should be performed for educationally sound purposes, and that reading tests should be consistent with the curriculum being taught.

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